

A Life-Saving Mission

by Maj Richard C. Sater
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By saving another's life, he saved his own.

SSgt Tyree Bacon is well aware that his story hinges on one of those ironic twists of fate. It is no less unfathomable than the rest of Sept. 11, 2001.

The New York native is a firefighter with the 514th Civil Engineer Squadron, McGuire Air Force Base, NJ, on the weekends, but on the civilian side, he works for the state of New York as an officer assigned to the Supreme Court in Manhattan, about 10 blocks from the site of the World Trade Center. He's also trained as an emergency medical technician.

On the morning of Sept. 11, he recalls being in the locker room at the court building when "we heard a bang," he says. "I remember saying, as a joke, 'Oh, no! They took out the World Trade Center!'"

He and his co-workers climbed to the roof of the 18-story court building. They could see the smoke. Within minutes, he says, "we were mobilizing officers to respond. There were 10 of us. We figured it was an accident, and we were going to help out. Then we heard the second explosion as we were getting ready to go. We didn't know what it was."

In a court bus, Bacon and his co-workers headed toward the trade center, parking about two blocks away. Both towers were in flames, the air already thick with smoke and debris. "Just utter chaos," he says. "Airplane wreckage in the street." He pauses a moment. "People jumping from the towers."

Bacon and his co-workers looked for an emergency medical station. There was none yet. They grabbed medical bags from the bus and headed downstairs under Building 5 of the trade center complex, into the mall one level below the street, looking for the injured.

One was a woman with burns over 60 percent of her body. Bacon told his co-workers he would stay and assist her; and they continued on deeper into the mall. Bacon managed to find a wheelchair and was making his way to the stairs with the woman when the first tower collapsed, sending a shock wave through the whole area as the walls came tumbling down.

"I thought it was a bomb. I couldn't breathe. Couldn't see," he says. "I was feeling my way around." His small flashlight didn't help much; the woman he'd been assisting was screaming — in fear and in pain. "She kept saying 'Don't leave me!'" he recalls.

He managed, somehow, to navigate the darkness and the debris with his patient and stepped outside into a changed landscape. In the immediate aftermath, he remembers dead silence. Everywhere, the ground seemed covered with ash, but he realized it was pulverized

concrete, and then the whole world started screaming.

"I've never experienced war before in my life," he says, "but I've seen hell."

He found a triage area that had been set up not far from the site and delivered his patient. He's uncertain of her fate, given the severity of her burns, but he is certain of this: "If I didn't save her life, she saved mine." The three co-workers who had gone further into Building 5 with him are still listed among the missing.

The second tower collapsed. Bacon and his remaining co-workers made their way back to the courthouse for a roll call and then headed back to the trade center site to search for the missing. They would return several times during the week on the same mission.

Revisiting the day troubles him — especially the "why." "It was meant to instill fear in us. They [the terrorists] didn't count on us to unite the way we did. We've pulled together. But it's a shame that we need a tragedy to unite us."

His emotions are mixed — hope, anger, sadness. "This happened in my own back yard," he says. "New York is my home." He pauses. "I don't think it will ever be the same as it was."



SSgt Tyree Bacon, 514th CES, checks an air pack at the McGuire AFB flightline fire station. Sergeant Bacon was one of many Air Force reservists who responded to the World Trade Center attack in New York City in their civilian jobs as firefighters, law enforcement officers and others. (Photo by Maj Richard C. Sater)